An approach to the Understanding of Islam

By: Dr. Ali Shariati

The First Night's Lecture

MY LECTURE is about the various approaches one can use to come to know Islam. It is an important scientific concept to review multiple approaches to the understanding of something in order to arrive at a particular methodology, which in our case is to come to understand Islam.

Arriving at a methodology in approaching a problem is a significant aspect of the scientific method. Having a correct method in order to discover the truth of an issue is more important than having a philosophy, a science or being talented.

We know that Europe was stagnant for a thousand years during the Middle Ages. Yet, right after this period of stagnancy, it developed a revolutionary momentum in the areas of science, art and literature, that is, all human and social areas. And, after a while, this movement, this revolution of minds became the foundation of today's civilization and world culture. Now we must stop and ask ourselves how it is that Europe, which was stagnant for a thousand years, in a matter of two or three centuries, suddenly changed its direction and discovered a truth?

This is a very important question and, perhaps, it is the most difficult question which science has to answer.

On the one hand, there are undoubtedly many different factors which caused the stagnation of Europe in the Middle Ages and on the other hand, there are various factors which suddenly awakened the drowsy Europe and led it towards movement and a dynamic development.

As to this point, I must remind you that the essential factor which caused the stagnation of the European mind, civilization and culture during the thousand years of the Middle Ages, was the use of the analogical method of Aristotle. When this way of looking at things and problems changed, science, the world and society also changed and human life along with them. Here we are speaking about culture, thought and scientific development.

This is why we see the change in approach as being the main factor in this movement. It is also true that the cause of the change according to the sociological point of view, is the movement from feudalism to the bourgeoisie system and that in itself was known to have opened the well-guarded walls between the Islamic East and the Christian West, in particular, through the Crusades. An approach is most sensitive whether it relates to development or decline. It is not individual genius in appraising a problem that causes stagnation, apathy or motion and development, but rather, the methodology used is important. In the 5th and 4th centuries B.C., great geniuses existed who are not comparable with the geniuses of the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries A.D. There is no doubt that Aristotle is more of a genius than Francis Bacon and that Plato is more of a genius than Roger Bacon. But, how is it that persons, who are at a lower level of genius than men like Aristotle, have laid the foundations for the development of science,

whereas those great geniuses themselves have caused the thousand years of stagnancy in the Middle Ages? How is it that a genius causes stagnation in the world, whereas an average person brings about the development of science and awareness in people?

The reason is that the second type has found the right way of thinking and methodology. In this way, an average mind can also find the truth, but a great genius, who does not know the right way of attending to problems, and the correct method of thinking, cannot use his genius effectively.

This is why we can see that many geniuses existed in the Greek civilization of the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. Their genius influenced the history of humanity. They were all gathered in Athens, but not even one wheel was invented there, whereas in today's Europe, an average technician, who cannot even perceive of Aristotle and his words, has registered hundreds of inventions. The best example is Thomas Edison whose philosophical abilities are less than that of Aristotle's third-hand students and yet, he contributed more to the discovery of laws hidden in nature and the creation of industry through the registration of a thousand large and small inventions than all of the students fed by Aristotle's thoughts for 2400 years.

Thinking right is like walking right. A person who has less speed and is lame, but chooses a straight and paved way will reach his destination sooner than a winning champion who runs on a stony road. The champion will not reach his aim, no matter how fast he runs, whereas the lame runner, who has chosen the right way, will reach his goal and destination.

The point here is to choose the right method for the various kinds of knowledge whether it be an approach to literature, society, art or psychology. Thus the first duty of every researcher is to choose the best method or approach in beginning his or her research. We should take advantage of the experiences that are part of our Islamic history. We must know ourselves to be responsible followers of a great religion and come to know Islam correctly and methodical-

Our age is not an age to worship things we do not know. This is particularly true for those who are educated. Their responsibility is even heavier when confronted by the sacred. It is not only an Islamic duty, but a scientific and humanitarian one as well to find a meaningful approach to the understanding of Islam. One's personality is balanced by what one knows in proportion to what one believes. Beliefs alone are not virtues. If we believe in something and do not know it, it has no value because virtue comes from knowing what we believe in well. We believe in Islam. We are therefore obliged to know it well. In order to know it well, we must arrive at a correct approach. Now the question arises, what is the best approach to use in order to come to know Islam well.

In order to come to know the truths of Islam we should not use a European approach such as, for example, one based on biology, psychology or sociology. We must, rather, initiate an approach. We must, most certainly, know the European scientific methods, but we should not require ourselves to imitate them. Today all scientific methods in all fields have changed. They have taken on a new look. Religious truths, must of necessity, do the same.

It is clear that in order to know Islam, we cannot choose one approach exclusive to all other ones, because Islam is not a onedimensional religion. Islam is not a religion which is based solely on the gnostic feelings of human beings or limited to the relationship between God and man. This is just one dimension of the Islamic faith. In order to know this particular dimension, we should turn to a philosophical method because the relationship between man and God is part of this field of thought.

Another dimension of this faith relates to one's way of life upon this earth. In order to come to know the truths of this dimension, we must make use of today's sociological and historical methods. Thus, if we look at Islam from just one point of view, we have only seen one dimension of a many-sided crystal. If we looked at the issue correctly, we would realize that it is not sufficient to have a general knowledge of Islam. The Qur'an itself is an example of multiple dimensions from which various sciences have been drawn throughout history.

One issue which many scholars and artists have discussed is whether or not the Qur'an is literal or literary. The other dimension of Islam is its philosophical teachings and that which causes one to have faith in the Qur'an. Today's philosophers should consider this dimension.

The most important dimension of the Qur'an, which is the least known, is its human aspect consisting of its social, historic and psychological dimension. One of the reasons for this remaining an unknown dimension is because sociology, psychology and human sciences in general are newer sciences and this differs from other historical studies and books, which are among the oldest ones ever written.

Historical events relating to tribes and the fate of nations and their relationships and the causes of decadence of different nations are mentioned in the Qur'an, especially in the longer verses. A historian should study them from a scientific point of view. A sociologist should look at them through a sociological method. To discuss and understand problems of natural science and the phenomena of nature, a natural method is needed. As my special field is history and sociology, I give myself the right to everything that comes to mind as a plan of approach. I will mention two methods, both of which are from the same point of view and that is that of the social and historic study of human sciences. In order to make myself clear, I liken religion to an individual.

There are only two ways to know a great personality. These two methods should be joined in order to be able to come to know the great individual. To begin with, one should become familiar, in a scientific way, with all his thoughts, writings, suggestions, speeches, articles and books. In other words, it is necessary to know the mind, thoughts and ideas of a person in order to come to know the individual. But research alone is not sufficient because there are so many aspects in one's personal life which are not reflected in one's written works or speeches. Only reflections of them appear, but they are not really known.

The second way, which completes knowing the individual, is to review his life and discover his family background, where he was born, what was his race and nation, how he spent his childhood, how was he brought up, what kind of an environment did he grow up in, where did he study, who were his teachers, what events did he face in his lifetime, what were his victories and his defeats? and? In review, there are two fundamental ways to come to know an individual, both of which one must follow. The

first is to study his thoughts and ideas and the other is to study his or her life from the beginning.

A religion is similar to an individual. Its works and thoughts are its book which form the text of the school which it invites people to join. The biography and the description of a religion forms its history.

Thus, in order to know Islam in a precise and detailed manner which is up to today's standards, two major ways exist. The first is to study the Qur'an, which is a collection of thoughts and the remains of the ideas and science of a personality named Islam. The second is to study the history of Islam which describes the changes which have occurred from the beginning of the Prophetic mission to the present. This is a method but unfortunately the approaches to studying Islam to date are very weak especially as regards the Qur'an and the history of Islam. They are only marginal notes to a scientific method of researching Islam. Fortunately, with the awareness of Islamic societies today, the attention of Moslems towards knowing the content of the Qur'an and an analysis of Islamic history increases each day.

Farhat Abbas in his book entitled, The Night of Imperialism, says, 'The social awakening of countries of North Africa, namely Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia began the day when Sheykh Mohammad Abduh went to North Africa and began teaching the interpretation of the Qur'an,' which was not normally done in religious assemblies. We see that the author of this book, in spite of the fact that he himself is not religious, recognizes that the awakening and changes in North African countries began when the Moslems and religious scholars put other religious research aside and based their main studies on references to the Qur'an and doing research on its text. Thus, there are two ways of obtaining exact, scientific knowledge of the Qur'an. The first is knowing the Qur'an to be a text of Islamic thought, and the second is to know the history of Islam which has recorded the multiple stages of its growth.

If today's Iranian Moslems turn their mosques into centers of social activity and they rely on the two principles of the Qur'an and its history, thereby initiating a program to educate the masses, they will have laid the most essential basis possible for the development of the greatest changes in Islamic thought.

One further method for coming to know Islam exists. It is a method known as typology. Most sociologists today believe this method to be the best approach to solving problems of sociology and in particular, for the comparison of one school of thought to another. In order to come to know Islam, I used a method which is also used in Europe in researching the sciences of humanity. I was able to arrive at a method which can be used for all religions.

It is to know five distinguished modes or aspects of a religion and then compare them with its similar mode in other religions.

1. The God or gods of every religion who is or are worshipped by the followers of this religion.

2. The Book of the religion as the foundation of a law which this religion brings and invites people to believe in and practice.

3. The Prophet of every religion who declares the mission of this religion .

4. The form of and appearance of those who are addressed by the religion. Every prophet declares his prophetic mission in a different way. One addresses people, another, princes and nobles and another, scientists, philosophers and select people. Thus, sometimes a prophet appears in the form of a person who accepts the existing power structure, whereas another prophet arises in the form of a claimant in opposition to the power structure.

5. The hand-picked followers of every religion are the examples and representatives of people who are trained in that religion and then offer it to society and history.

In order to properly understand the workings of a factory or the earth of a cultivatable piece of land which is to be planted, one must study the goods exported from that factory or the grains produced by that land. In the case of religion, the people trained by that religion are its goods which are produced by a factory which, in a sense, produces the components that built individual human beings. Now then, in order to have knowledge of Islam in this system, one needs to first know God. There are many ways possible to come to know God such as through knowing beings or through philosophy and illumination of the soul or through gnosticism or through examining the details.

But the method I introduce to you is a method of typology. It is to first, study the type, origin, mode, concept and particulars of God which Islam takes into consideration. For example, what is Omnipotent? Is It Merciful? Is It superior to the existing world? Is It associated with humanity? Does Its aspect of Mercy overcome Its Omnipotence or visa versa? Generally, what type is It? What kind of God is It?

In order to have proper knowledge of these particulars, one should refer to the Qur'an, the Prophet's words or the special followers trained by the Prophet. These qualities are either distinguished in the Qur'an or pointed out in the words of the Prophet and his followers where they compare Allah with other gods, conceived of in other religions such as Ahuramazda, Yahwa, Zeus, and so forth. **The second stage is to know the Qur'an**. What kind of book is it? What problems does it consider? Does it speak more about life on this earth or the after-life? Does it address itself more to the individual and moral matters or social aspects? Does it refer more to the material or to the spiritual? Has it accommodated nature more or the individual? Finally, what problems does it consider and what form do they take?

For example, in proving the existence of God, the verse tells us, 'Let us purify our soul in order to know God.' With the study of what material will we gain intimacy and know the particulars? Or, are both ways required? We should also compare the Qur'an to other religious texts such as the Bible, the Vedas, the Avesta and so forth. **The third stage to come to know Islam is to know Mohammad (P.B.U.H.), the son of Abdullah, as the Prophet of this religion.** Knowing the Prophet of Islam is important for a historian because, in his eyes, no other person has ever had the responsibility which the Prophet of Islam had in the infinitely powerful event which took place.

When we speak about the personality of the Prophet of Islam, our purpose is to consider both how he oriented himself towards humanity as well as his relationship with God. In other words, we should reflect upon both his human dimension and his prophetic mission.

For example, in considering his human dimension, we should study his way of speaking, walking, thinking, laughing, sitting and sleeping. We should become aware of his relationship to foreigners, enemies, friends and family. Also, his defeats, triumphs and his reaction to social problems should be reviewed.

Thus, one of the essential ways of coming to know Truth, the soul and the primary reality of Islam, is to know its Prophet and compare him with other religious architects and prophets such as Moses, Jesus, Zoroaster and Buddha.

The fourth stage is to study the quality of the appearance of the Prophet of Islam. How, for example, does he appear without any introduction? Is anyone waiting for him? Did he know what his Prophetic mission was? A powerful force suddenly comes to him and changes his way of speaking or his personality in a way which was difficult for him to bear at the beginning. What movement was present when he made his appearance? What class did he tend towards more? What class did he rise to combat?

The answers to these will help us in knowing Islam's prophet and also in knowing the quality of his manifestation. If we compare the quality of the Prophet of Islam's manifestation to the appearance of other prophets, positive or negative, such as Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Confucius, Buddha, and so forth, we will arrive at an incredible conclusion.

All of the prophets, with the exception of those part of the Abrahamic tradition, recognize the power existing at the time and achieve their mission with the help of that power, whereas the Abrahamic prophets, from Abraham through to the Prophet of Islam, appeared in a form which rebelled against the existing power.

As soon as Abraham appeared, he began breaking the idols one by one. He struck the largest idol and announced his opposition to polytheism.

The first act of Moses, wearing the clothes of a shepherd and staff in hand, was to enter the Pharoah's court and announce his opposition to the Pharoah in favor of uniting his people. Jesus began his struggle with the existing power of the Jewish clergy because the clergy were connected with and accepted the colonization policies of Rome.

As soon as the chain of the prophetic mission reached the Prophet Mohammad, he began his struggle with the aristocracy, slaveowners, landowners of Taif and the Qoraish merchants. The comparisons will help us to come to know truth, spirit and direction of these religions.

The fifth stage of knowing Islam is through studying individuals who form the components that built distinct and distinguished individual human beings.

If we choose to study Aaron in the Jewish tradition, St. Paul in the Christian tradition and Ali or Hosein in the Islamic tradition, as examples of their religion, each religion would become known to us. Knowing these men clearly and scientifically would be like recognizing a factory through the goods it produces because religion is like a factory that builds people.

Tonight we will take Hosein as a distinct example of the Islamic faith. What is someone who believes in God, the Qur'an and the Prophet like? The life of Hosein is clear. His principles are evident and his sensitivity to social problems and the fate of people is obvious from his work and his self-sacrifice. It is clear that if the truth, his aim and beliefs are endangered, all relationships will be destroyed. In addition to knowing the life and thoughts of Hosein and his qualities, one could then compare him to Avicenna or Hallaj who are both Moslems, one influenced by Iranian philosophy and the other by Sufism. The comparison of these three will help us to become aware of the differences and similarities between philosophy, Sufism and Islam.

Avicenna is a philosopher-scientist and a genius, who does great honor to the science and philosophy of Islam. But this great human being, unfortunately, strangles himself in literary and philosophical points and when it comes to society, he easily serves the existing power structure. He shows no reaction to the fate of humanity and his society. Actually, he feels no connection between his fate and that of others. His job is only to research scientific problems and it makes no difference to him how his life passes by. He makes no distinction as to who it is who is supporting him or who is offering him a position. It is all the same to him. He has no special point of view. Hallaj catches fire and is burned. He has no responsibility and only shouts and burns. What does he burn of? He holds his head between his two hands from love of God and walks through the streets of Baghdad crying, 'Rebellion has taken me over. Release me from the fire which is burning within me. I am nothing. I am God,' meaning, 'I am not me and everything which exists is God.' He consistently sinks into the fire of the memory of God who is most certainly within him at that station. But what if Iranian society consisted of 25 million Hallajs? It would be like a lunatic asylum when they all rush into the streets shouting, 'Kill me! Kill me quickly! I cannot bear it! I have nothing! There is nothing in me but God.' Such burnings are of a kind of spiritual insanity. If all of the individuals of a society were to turn into Hoseins or Abuzars, there would be life and there would be liberty. There would be knowledge and learning as well as power and stability; enemies would be destroyed and there would only remain love for God.